

Redefining Roman status: reading the tombs of freed slaves

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Freedmen and women are a ghostly presence in most accounts of Roman history: they don't fit into the usual discussions of wars and high politics, they are not a major concern of the upper class intellectuals who provide most of our literary sources, and, unlike slaves, they don't fit into the cosy confines of domestic comedy either. Nonetheless, the peculiarly Roman enthusiasm for manumitting (freeing) slaves created an enormous class of freedmen and women in towns throughout Italy, and they played a crucial role in Roman society and in the economy. One way to begin to tell their story, and to tell it in their own terms, is to look at the funerary monuments they built for themselves and each other.

First, though, some indication of the numbers involved. The proportion of Roman funerary inscriptions which commemorate ex-slaves is staggering. In Republican Rome, they outnumber those of the freeborn by three to one. In Puteoli, the major port on the Bay of Naples, the ratio across all periods is ten to one. These statistics don't easily relate to the proportion of freedmen and women in the living population of these cities. For one thing, these characters may well have spent much of their lives as slaves, and for another, ex-slaves may have been unusually keen to commemorate themselves and their new status as citizens. But they do give us some idea of the incredible scale of manumission by the Late Republic.

An economic powerhouse

Funerary inscriptions can tell us about lifestyle as well. It seems from their geographical distribution that freedmen and women were concentrated in centres of commerce, production, and trade, such as Rome and the cities of the Campanian coast. In addition, the inscriptions often list the profession of the deceased, so we know that they were frequently involved in exactly these sectors of the economy, in all sorts of businesses from carpentry to the naval trade to money-lending. Their commercial success was no doubt aided by the way that slavery had provided them with access to training, funding and contacts. But how did the economic role played by freedmen and women relate to their own perception and representation of themselves? Their tombs suggest that for some, at least, their radical role as economic agents was combined with a radical attitude to self-definition.

This radicalism developed slowly. A set of tombs on the via Statilia in Rome, dating from the early decades of the first century B.C., represent a style which was very popular among freedmen and women in the Late Republic. In one of them, we see the deceased stare out at the living as if from the windows of their own house. They wear traditional Roman dress, including togas, and that their faces have the stamp of the conservative, hyper-realistic portrait style favoured by a section of the Roman elite at this time. Because of this, it has been suggested that they are seeking to emphasise their status as free Roman citizens, and to demonstrate their desire to assimilate to the citizen body by aping its most traditional manifestations. Indeed, in the inscriptions that accompany the portraits on this tomb, great care has been taken to note the precise legal status as well as the names of each of the occupants, and in two cases their voting tribe as well.

Proud to stand apart

Connections with the state and the citizenship are certainly being made on the via Statilia, but some later tombs demonstrate attempts to surmount and circumvent this symbolic language of citizenship, and to prize economic and social position above legal status. The famous tomb of the baker Eurysaces provides a good example.

This tomb stands just outside the Porta Maggiore in Rome, and dates from some time early in the reign of Augustus. It could not be more different from the miniature houses of the via Statilia: here we are no longer at home but at work. The tomb itself is a piece of bread-making technology (exactly which part has been the subject of lengthy debate: kneading basins are the latest guess). It has a decorative frieze, but rather than repeating the kind of military and heroic themes that are found in the decoration of aristocratic republican tombs – the tomb of the Scipios on the via Appia, for instance, or the tomb of the Fabii on the Esquiline – the frieze depicts stages in the bread-making process. The inscription, which runs in between the upper and lower registers of the tomb, proudly proclaims Eurysaces' profession, baker (*pistor*). It probably also declares his role as a state contractor: the scale of the public corn dole operation in this period must have offered a lot of opportunities for public-private partnership. The baker's legal status as a freedman is, by contrast, unmentioned: it seems that it is his economic rather than legal relationship with the state that is of interest to Eurysaces.

An exuberant joke

The whole monument is exuberant, with none of the careful conservatism of the via Statilia tombs. Its innovation has sometimes been compared to that of the tombs of wealthy freeborn Romans of this period, such as the pyramid of Gaius Cestius, but it has a different tone: while the pyramid celebrates the successes of Roman military imperialism in Egypt, the baker's tomb celebrates his own success in the world of production and commerce, and in a more down to earth way. The joke continues with his wife Atistia's funerary urn, which is in the shape of a bread-basket.

Unlike the freedmen and woman of the via Statilia, this couple are revelling in their differences from the freeborn elite. Rather than simply imitating traditional Roman funerary iconography, they are adapting it, or subverting it, to their own social and commercial purposes. There is at least one continuity, though: a full-length marble relief portrait of a couple in rather up-to-date Roman dress seems to have formed part of the monument. This would suggest that at the same time as marking their professional difference, the couple were careful to note their social equality. Their differences are a supplement, not an alternative.

Professional self-confidence was not unique to Eurysaces, or to Rome. The second and third century A.D. tombs of freedmen and women in the Isola Sacra cemetery between Ostia and Portus are obvious successors to the house-like via Statilia style, but their reliefs show a great deal of commercial pride: the tomb of Eutychus, for instance, shows a boat and a grain mill, while Scribonia Attice's tomb depicts her practice as a mid-wife.

Pompeii provides a final example in the first century A.D. tomb of C. Munatius Faustus, which advertises his involvement in trade or port activity by way of a boat relief on the side of the monument. As with Eurysaces, his civic links are also emphasised on the monument, but here the main focus is social rather than economic. The inscription describes him as an *Augustalis*, a priest of the imperial cult, and the main relief shows him acting in this capacity, handing out gifts to the community; it is worth noting that this scene is exactly what Petronius's fictional freedman Trimalchio, also an *Augustalis*, tells his dinner guests he wants depicted on his tomb.

Outside Rome, the *Augustales* were associated overwhelmingly – though not exclusively – with freedmen, and since the major public magistracies were closed to ex-slaves, this priesthood served as a kind of shadow or alternative municipal career for them. *Augustales* had their own seats at the games, and their own insignia of office. The emphasis on service as an *Augustalis* on this and many other tombs of the period can be seen as a way of subtly undermining the social cachet of the traditional freeborn elite, and demonstrating – in fact celebrating – the variety of routes now available to social status, which no longer depended solely on freeborn legal status.

These ex-slaves are not simply pretending to be what they are not by imitating freeborn citizen norms. Instead, they are marking what they are and what they do as a source of pride. Over time, as their economic contribution becomes increasingly important, freedmen and women are writing a new set of social and cultural rules, based not on legal status or political office, but on commercial success and community standing.

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The inscription on the baker's tomb:

EST HOC MONUMENTUM MARCEI VERGILEI EURYSACIS,
PISTORIS, REDEMPTORIS, APPARET.

(ILLRP 805)

This is the memorial of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, contract baker. He is in public service.

Part of the inscription on the tomb of C. Munatius Faustus:

NAEVOLEIA L LIB(ERTA) TYCHE SIBI ET
C MUNATIO FAUSTO AUG(USTALI) ET PAGANO
CUI DECURIONES CONSENSU POPULI
BISELLIUM OB MERITA EIUS DECREVERUNT.

(ILS 6373)

Naevoleia, freedwoman of Lucius, (set this up) for herself and for Gaius Munatius Faustus, Augustalis and resident (of the Augusta Felix district), to whom the councillors with the consent of the populace decreed a seat of honour, because of his services.

(The 'seat of honour' would probably be in the amphitheatre. Munatius was obviously one of the elite freedmen of Pompeii, and his 'services' will have consisted in paying for some of Pompeii's public buildings/public works. Freedmen weren't eligible to be councillors, so this sort of honour was a substitute.)